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McSweeney's and the Challenges of the Marketplace for Independent Publishing

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Volume 15 Issue 4 (December 2013) Article 3
Katrien Bollen, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen,
"McSweeney's and the Challenges of the Marketplace for Independent Publishing"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss4/3>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.4 (2013)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss4/>>

Abstract: In their article "McSweeney's and the Challenges of the Marketplace for Independent Publishing" Katrien Bollen, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen argue that the artistic projects of the US-American author, activist, and editor Dave Eggers are marked by a tension between the desire for independence and the demands of brand-building. The article offers a close analysis of the materiality and paratexts of one particular issue of *McSweeney's*, the literary magazine of which Eggers is the founding editor. Both the content and the apologetically aggressive tone of Eggers's editorial statements betray a deep unease with the inability to inhabit a cultural and economic position that is untainted by the compromises that publishing requires. Still, this disavowed complicity with the market in fact sustains Eggers's editorial practice in *McSweeney's*, which, in marked contrast to his explicit statements, thrives on a dynamic of commodification.

Katrien BOLLEN, Stef CRAPS, and Pieter VERMEULEN

McSweeney's and the Challenges of the Marketplace for Independent Publishing

From the publication of his best-selling memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) through the development of increasingly intricate links between his literary work and social activism, the trajectory of the versatile US-American author and independent publisher Dave Eggers has been marked by a self-conscious "effort to control all the aspects of his paratextual world" in general (Brouillette <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/032/brouillette.htm>>) and his public persona in particular (see, e.g., Hamilton). More often than not, these efforts have been directed at critics who question whether Eggers's loudly proclaimed disinterest in financial gain is more than a clever self-marketing ploy. Particularly notorious is Eggers's skirmish with *New York Times* reporter David Kirkpatrick, whose article about the Vintage paperback release of *A.H.W.O.S.G.*, entitled "Ambivalent Writer Turns His Memoir Upside Down; Denouncing Profits and Publishers While Profiting from Publication," struck a raw nerve with its critical remarks about the business end of Eggers's success. For one thing, Kirkpatrick criticizes the fact that Eggers convinced Vintage to publish "three different versions [of the paperback], each with its own cover illustration," a strategy that Kirkpatrick interprets as one of the author's "attention-getting twists" and a shrewd way to make fans buy more than one copy of the book (B1). In an online rebuttal that was later removed from the *McSweeney's* website, Eggers complained that Kirkpatrick's article "threw skepticism where none was warranted" and was therefore little more than "a snippety little thing full of sneering and suspicion" written by "a hatchet wielder" ("Clarification" <http://web.archive.org/web/20010331103856/www.mcsweeneys.net/news/clar_nytimes.html>). Eggers does not so much attack the content of the article — a few minor "factual fabrications" aside — as "the strangely icky, almost angry tone" Kirkpatrick allegedly adopts to describe the author's "agonizingly ambivalent if not downright contradictory feelings about publishing and selling his story" ("Clarification" <http://web.archive.org/web/20010331103856/www.mcsweeneys.net/news/clar_nytimes.html>). Kirkpatrick's article also included off-the-record comments from email correspondence with Eggers (see Hamilton 55) and was published before the latter had approved the final version (see Conrad; Truitt).

Given that the *New York Times* is a high-profile newspaper, it should come as no surprise that Kirkpatrick's observations triggered a stronger reaction than similar comments that had already been made by other reviewers (see, e.g., Begley), as well as by Eggers's own fan base (Hamilton 56). More remarkable, however, is that Kirkpatrick was in fact simply repeating the author's own admissions in the "Acknowledgments" section of the paperback edition of *A.H.W.O.S.G.* Indeed, as Eggers's animosity indicates, Kirkpatrick and other critics hit upon an unresolved tension between a posture of blissful independence and the inevitable pressures of the market at the heart of Eggers's artistic enterprise — a tension that does not simply disappear by the fact that Eggers registers his awareness of it. The fact that Eggers was upset may suggest that the author operates on the naive assumption that pre-empting criticism simply "make[s] it go away" (Begley <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jul/15/biography>>). Thus, when Eggers apologetically dismisses profit and corporate publishing in the preface to his bestseller, he believes the issue of his own ambivalence thereby to have been rendered irrelevant.

This article aims to show how deep-rooted the tension between independence and market pressures is in Eggers's work by focusing on his influential and award-winning yet curiously understudied literary magazine *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* — frequently abbreviated as *McSweeney's*. The magazine was founded in 1998 and is produced by Eggers's independent publishing house, which is also called *McSweeney's* and which is perhaps best known for publishing socially committed work and redirecting its proceeds to educational and other non-profit organizations such as the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, 826 Valencia, and the Zeitoun Foundation. Crucial for our current purpose is *McSweeney's* Issue 4 (2000), "arguably [the] best issue [of *McSweeney's*] ever," according to the *McSweeney's* store website (<<https://store.mcsweeneys.net/products/mcsweeneys-issue-4>>), in which Eggers explores the

ambivalence towards the literary market that had already surfaced in the wake of *A.H.W.O.S.G.* Issue 4 is presented to the reader in the form of a sturdy 6.75 x 9.5 inch box with fourteen separate booklets that feature work by Haruki Murakami, George Saunders, Lydia Davis, and Jonathan Lethem, to name just a few of the most prominent contributors. Also included in the box is a twelve-page editor's note that presents Eggers's views on twenty-first-century publishing and the commodification of literary artifacts. Taking our cue from Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, we analyze how Eggers uses the paratextual architecture of Issue 4 — or indeed, the interplay of "framing elements ... that mediate [the magazine] to the reader," including (sub)titles, pseudonyms, notes, and material aspects such as cover art (Macksey xviii) — to at once exemplify the editorial views presented in the issue and to thematize its underlying ambivalence when it comes to authorial/editorial fame, commercialism, brand-building, and commodity production.

One of the most striking paratextual features of *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* is, of course, its peculiar title, which suggests that the publication was founded and is edited by one Timothy McSweeney rather than by Dave Eggers and therefore illustrates Genette's point that the title of a literary work may function as "an artificial object" that adds meaningful dimensions to the work as such (55-56). In an email to a friend in 1998, before the publication of the first issue, Eggers explained that he had named his literary magazine after a mentally unstable man whom he had never even met, "a man named Timothy McSweeney, who, when I was growing up, used to write long, tortured, often incomprehensible letters to my family [among others], claiming to be a long-forgotten member of my mother's side (she was Adelaide McSweeney), and outlining when and where he would be in the coming months, should we need to reach him and bring him back into the fold" (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 1). On the front cover of *McSweeney's* Issue 1, which was said to have been "CREATED in honor of and named for Mr. T. Mc," Eggers revealed the identity of the mysterious Timothy McSweeney, claiming that the man simply "*wanted attention, some consideration, an attentive ear and also, perhaps — perchance, to dream! — re-admittance into the MCSWEENEY FAMILY*" (emphasis the original), and on the front cover of Issue 2 he added that McSweeney "*was nuts, sure, but in the most endearing way*" (emphasis in original). As Eggers flaunted his possible family connection with the mentally unstable man — as opposed to ignoring him as the rest of the McSweeney family did — and even named a literary magazine and a publishing house after him, the ever-elusive Timothy McSweeney soon became a McSweeney's myth and the name gradually took on a meaning of its own.

In the case of *McSweeney's*, the signifier "Timothy McSweeney" both thematizes the inauthenticity of today's celebrity culture and marks Eggers's tongue-in-cheek recognition of cultural concerns over the complex interrelations between symbolic and economic capital. Specifically, the name "Timothy McSweeney" can be said to function as one of Eggers's pseudonyms — a device that, as Robert Griffin points out, can offer authors "the protective cloak of anonymity" (66) and thus pre-empt criticism of one's authorial (or, in this case, editorial) identity. Indeed, by using someone else's name for — and thereby ironically disavowing ownership of — a literary magazine that is still clearly associated with his real name, Eggers is able to at once mock his own celebrity status and use it for the benefit of his work as an independent publisher and editor of the popular and quirky magazine called *McSweeney's*. However, despite the editor's strong impact on the editorial policy of *McSweeney's*, it would be wrong to read the signifier "Timothy McSweeney" as a pen name used for only Eggers himself. Instead, "Timothy McSweeney" is an umbrella term that metonymically represents the various authorial and editorial voices for which *McSweeney's* provides a forum; a name that helps to create a sense of coherence, which, however, is undercut by the ever-changing appearance and content of the actual issues. Nevertheless, the figure of Timothy McSweeney brings about a degree of unity in fragmentation by suggesting that the magazine as a whole reflects a single man's aesthetic and editorial vision — a vision that is heavily influenced by, but cannot be reduced to, that of Dave Eggers.

The editorial rationale behind *McSweeney's* Issue 4 is expressed most forcefully in the booklet "Notes and Background and Clarifying Charts and Some Complaining," which functions as a long editor's note and addresses two of *McSweeney's* pet subjects: the importance of the literary artifact as an aesthetic object on the one hand, and the relationship between authors, readers, and the

(independent) publishing industry on the other. It is important to note that while the booklet presents a new paradigm for literary magazines, it does so with *McSweeney's*'s hallmark self-consciousness, which is already conveyed by the full title of Issue 4: "Timothy / McSweeney's / Trying, Trying, Trying, Trying, Trying." Whether interpreted as "Timothy McSweeney is relentlessly trying" or "this box contains the result of the relentless attempts undertaken by Timothy McSweeney," the title suggests the tentativeness that comes with a flawed but well-intentioned attempt rather than the bombastic self-assurance of a definitive editorial statement. Ambivalence, in other words, is presented as inherent to the issue through its title.

In terms of its cultural position, too, *McSweeney's* is intrinsically ambiguous. In his first call for contributions to *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Eggers characterized his new "offbeat quarterly" (Sullivan <<http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Eggers-Surprised-By-Success-Author-to-read-from-2935959.php>>) as "a place where odd things that one could never shoehorn into a mainstream periodical, and might be too quirky for other journals, might find a home. I do not expect everyone, or anyone, to produce brand-new stuff. I am relying on everyone who gets this letter, or who passes it on to a friend (feel free), will have things sitting in a closet that they had long ago abandoned hope of publishing [sic]. There will be an emphasis on experimentation. If you have a story that's good, but conventional, you'd probably be better off sending it somewhere legitimate. This thing will be more about trying new, and almost certainly misguided, ideas" (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 1). While Eggers presents *McSweeney's* as an alternative to mainstream periodicals, he is also quick to dismiss the notion that his new publication might be an instance of "what is known, among the youth, as a 'zine'" (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 1). The author's explicit rejection of the "zine" label is not related to the typically "odd" or "quirky" content of such publications (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 1) — in fact, Eggers's own suggestions for contributions such as "[s]hort reviews of wars and skirmishes" (with a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" rating at the end), "[o]ne-question interviews with semi-famous people," and "[c]artoons without pictures" are neither serious nor conventional (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 2-3) — but instead appears to stem from his dislike of the visual aesthetics and concomitant throwaway quality of zines. Literary zines, in particular, are typically produced with a minimal budget and in a fairly haphazard and even sloppy way, often in the context of (poetry) performances. For instance, most issues of the biannual *Unbearables Assembling Magazine*, a zine founded in New York in 1994, are produced during assembling parties, a type of poetry reading for which all participants are expected to print their poems and/or artwork and bring a specific number of copies to the performance venue (see Bollen). At the end of the reading, the participants simply staple together all contributions to form the next issue of the zine in question. The result is an unedited, heterogeneous collection of xeroxes with different type fonts, layouts, and paper weights — or, indeed, a fragile and therefore ephemeral physical manifestation of a literary event. Eggers, by contrast, insists that the *McSweeney's* quarterly "won't be ziney-looking. It will look beautiful, actually, with a restrained, antiques sort of feel" (qtd. in *Art* 2). The quarterly "will be about 160 pages, perfect-bound, and will in many ways look like most literary quarterlies" (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 1). Put differently, while the delightfully absurd content of *McSweeney's* may be reminiscent of zines, the materiality of the issues is meant to be that of the best quarterlies: objects of admiration that "you want to buy, hold, bring to bed or the tub or the beach. Things you want to keep" (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 5).

Whereas the first three issues of *McSweeney's* are single-volume magazines with simple yet elegant black-and-white covers, Issue 4 boasts an intriguing cover design that is in color and depicts a robin with human arms for wings and wooden boards for feet. Also, and crucially, the publication distinguishes itself from "traditional" literary magazines in that it is not a bound volume but a collection of fourteen separate booklets — each with their own color cover illustrations — in a white box with a flap lid. Owing to this unusual format, both *McSweeney's*'s Iceland-based printer Oddi and the only box-maker in the same country initially refused to produce the issue, complaining that its design was impossible to execute. Eggers, however, insisted, and he expressed his "disappointment" with their unwillingness to go along with his ambitious plans in a Reykjavik-based newspaper (Eggers qtd. in *Art* 41), so that the box-maker eventually caved in and produced the issue. The reporter who wrote the newspaper article in question later commented that Eggers and his co-editors' "fixation on such a detail made them even more eccentric" (Birna Anna

Björnsdóttir qtd. in *Art* 43). And yet, as the editor's note in Issue 4 indicates, the *McSweeney's* team was still not pleased with the outcome: "we are still looking for the right box. We wanted a sturdy box for all this stuff, and told Bjossi, the project manager, about our sturdy box need, and Bjossi has responded by offering three boxes thus far, but the cardboard for each has been much too thin. No way would they have held up. So he has pledged to keep looking: an hour from now, at 8:30 a.m., we will drive over and hope for the best, see what he's got. We will be here until it's right (we're at the Radisson, room 431), because the right box is important. It has to hold up and look right and feel right. The right box is everything" ("Notes" xii). Thus, when Issue 4 was reissued several years later, the round sticker on the plastic wrap around the magazine informed the reader that s/he had just bought "a faithful reproduction of [the] Winter 2000 issue," with one crucial exception: the booklets were "now in a sturdier box," as the earlier version had turned out too fragile.

The editorial obsession with the materiality of *McSweeney's* Issue 4 is inextricably intertwined with the premises of the publishing model that is put forth in and through the issue. Most important for our purposes is the 32-item list entitled "The Author's and Book Enjoyer's Bill of Rights, At Least Insofar as the Book Jacket Is Concerned" ("Notes" ix-xi) — a tongue-in-cheek reference to the United States Constitution — included in the booklet-length editor's note. Central to *McSweeney's* Bill of Rights is the premise that authors — rather than publishers, editors, and "what is known, in parlance, as 'the sales force'" — should have the freedom to choose their own book covers ("Notes" ix). This measure not only limits the power of the publishing industry but is also argued to be beneficial to both authors and book enjoyers, as it is believed to result in beautiful and high-quality publications rather than bland artifacts of which the materiality is dictated by purely commercial concerns. With authors' increased freedom, however, also come new limitations — a paradox that Issue 4, as we will show, puts to the fore.

In addition to proposing a new model for the interaction between authors, readers, and the publishing industry, *McSweeney's* Issue 4 also puts it into practice, as is illustrated by the box structure of the issue as a whole, but also by the physical appearance of the individual, unnumbered booklets. Indeed, "[i]n all but one case ('Dabchick' by Haruki Murakami, for reasons unknown), the cover art for the booklets was selected by the authors" (*Art* 42). The result is a heterogeneous and unique amalgam of images depicting "commemorative stamps featuring *Lolita* cover designs from around the world," a pencil-smudged drawing by an author's young son, soldiers' portraits taken in 1952, and a picture of a mown lawn, to give just a few examples (*Art* 42). As a result, Issue 4 presents the reader with a miniature library of book(let)s which fit the *McSweeney's* publishing model. At the same time, however, the requirement that authors choose their own book(let) jackets paradoxically ends up limiting the authors' freedom, not only because they *have to* make a choice, but also because Eggers and the rest of the *McSweeney's* team appear to have imposed very specific criteria in terms of both graphic design and subject matter.

As to the materiality of their booklets, the authors did not have any say in the type font, paper weight, or size used for their publication, as all items had to fit into the box format imposed by Eggers and his editorial team. Also, and crucially, while the Bill of Rights propagates authors' freedom to decide on their own book jackets, it is in fact most specific about what authors must not choose: "The cover shall be an enhancement of the book's content or spirit, not shorthand for it, or a caricature of it" ("Notes" x). Also forbidden are "a literal interpretation of the book's plot or characters," "a representation of the book's characters, thus snatching away the reader's right to imagine their appearance on his [sic] own," "images of books, pens, papers or pencils," and stereotypical images including "girls in swings, cherubs wielding bows and arrows, empty rowboats on placid lakes, troubled men sitting on the edges of beds, tangled sheets in any context, arrangements of half-empty bottles, women getting off streetcars, women sniffing flowers, neon signs, broken timepieces, bloody knives, smoking guns, stock photos from '50s-era advertising, anything stealing without shame from Magritte or Dalí or worse, [US-American Regionalist painter and muralist] Thomas Hart Benton" ("Notes" x). Put differently, underpinning the Bill of Rights is the assumption that all authors abhor the book jackets that are associated with commercial paperback publications and the stock images that their covers tend to feature. What is more, authors are explicitly forbidden to use "a rainbow ... Not even a small one, in the upper right-hand

corner" ("Notes" xi). This unmistakable reference to the logo of the Rainbow Pocket series asserts *McSweeney's* desire to differentiate itself from the publications in this series, but, contrary to what one might expect, the repudiation of the series should not be interpreted as a straightforward illustration of the virtues of cultural credibility versus the vices of commercialism. Instead, *McSweeney's* redefines the terms of the debate about the difference between corporate and independent publishing values and practices: the magazine does not so much reject commercial publishers' interest in economic gain as their lack of attention to graphic design and the aesthetic qualities of literary artifacts. In other words, *McSweeney's* accepts that all printed book(let)s are commodities, but they distinguish between "good" and "bad" commodities. The problem with the Rainbow Pocket series, then, is not that it reduces books to commodities; it is that the series reduces literary artifacts to *ugly* commodities.

Against this backdrop, Eggers's idea to publish the Vintage paperback edition of *A.H.W.O.S.G.* with three different cover illustrations becomes more than simply one of the author's "attention-getting twists" (Kirkpatrick B1). Specifically, the three different versions of the paperback edition demonstrate the uneasy juxtaposition of Eggers's authorial (Vintage) and editorial (*McSweeney's*) activities. Indeed, applied to a Vintage paperback publication, Eggers's insistence on original and beautiful book jackets inevitably becomes, as Vintage publisher Anne Messitte admits, an "artistic idea [that] also happen[s] to be brilliant marketing" (Eggers qtd. in Kirkpatrick B1). The commercial logic behind commodity-production intersects — and, in this case, conveniently overlaps — with the values of an independent publishing model that emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of literary artifacts. This is a paradox that Eggers has not publicly acknowledged.

As far as the subject matter is concerned, *McSweeney's* does not strictly impose topics, but various suggestions are made in "Notes and Background and Clarifying Charts and Some Complaining":

SUBJECT MATTERS ENCOURAGED FOR SUBMITTERS OF SUBMISSIONS (use of one or more of these subject matters will endear you and your writing to our editors): Caves; balloons; balloons stuck in caves, and unhappy about it; balloons living in caves, and feeling good about it; large trees with people living in them; wind; gold; talking animals who only speak Spanish; men who live in caves; women who live in caves; chairs that are too big; houses that are too big; holes that people fall into; volcanoes; things that are round but flat; things that are small but emit loud noises; clouds that appear in bedrooms, over beds, during sleep; waterfoxes, landwhales, and/or riverkittens; planets covered with yellow water (if need be, you may substitute violet); old men who run very fast; old men with two-by-fours for feet; birds with arms instead of wings; people with very long fingers, the bones of which are too brittle to use; how things are made in factories; how things are made in factories in Africa; how things were made in factories in Africa between 1939-1945; giant people who carry small purses; small people who drag from place to place large knapsacks full of pillows; anything at all about the ocean monkeys of the former Upper Volta; anything at all about the Hand People of Franz Josephland; anything about the furry, self-propelling rocks of the Dakotas; anything at all about anyone named Lucy, Isabelle, Paulina, Geoffrey, or Will; anything mentioning the pre-1990 Jonathan Pryce or (tastefully) incorporating former Congressman Fred Grandy; and anything at all about the Swamp People of Lourdes. ("Notes" ii-iv)

The paratactic and asyndetic style of the enumeration may very well suggest a lack of hierarchy or even an "anything goes" attitude towards literary subject matter, but, at the same time, all seemingly random topics in the list reflect Eggers's taste for the absurd. Therefore, although the absurdity of the proposed subject matter indicates that the suggestions are not to be taken seriously, lists such as the above are nevertheless effective in guiding submissions toward a certain aesthetic (of which the list itself arguably provides an example), given that contributors to the magazine generally "strive not just to emulate Eggers's style, but also to assimilate Eggers's subjects" (Siegel 50). Contributors, in other words, tend to submit work that they think will fit in with *McSweeney's* aesthetic, and that of *McSweeney's* star Eggers in particular. This is illustrated by the subject matter of the various contributions to Issue 4, and made explicit by Lydia Davis, who submitted her commissioned short story "A Mown Lawn" for the issue and commented: "I happened to have a story I thought would fit nicely, since it combined absurdity and passion, and he [Eggers] accepted it" (*Art* 43).

An additional indication of editorial steering can be found at the bottom of the title pages of the individual booklets — with the exception of "Notes and Background and Clarifying Charts and Some Complaining" — where the line "*McSweeney's Quarterly*, Issue 4, Late Winter 2000" is preceded by

the self-conscious publisher statements "published as a finger in the slightly irregular glove of," "still more of," "published under the warm downy wing of," "warm and dry under the umbrella of," "thinking inside the box of," "published behind the sturdy stone wall of," "published in the cool (but not damp) shade of," "appearing under the auspices of," "published in limited partnership with," "published within the sphere of influence of," "published as part of the imperfect union that is," "published under the watchful eye of," and "riding at the lead of the caravan known as." The overall image that emerges is that of a literary magazine that allows its contributors a considerable degree of freedom, but only within the confines of a certain aesthetic: authors are strongly encouraged to think inside the box of Issue 4 (literally) and the universe of McSweeney's (metaphorically). To a certain extent, then, the editors in Eggers's model take on a role that is not unlike that of the "sales force" in corporate publishing companies, even if the constraints imposed by the former are arguably based on loftier ideals than financial gain. What this shows is that dismissing corporate concerns in the name of an editorial ideal can inadvertently reproduce the compromised position that is being disowned. Indeed, insisting on "good" rather than "bad" commodities does not extricate Eggers's project from the tensions between independence and the forces of the market.

Equally problematic are the strategies used to construct a counterpublic that identifies with the aesthetics of *McSweeney's* and, as a result, provides a constant revenue stream for the magazine through subscriptions. Particularly worth examining in this regard is the disarmingly absurd and elaborately decorated "Subscriber Agreement" that can be found on top of the pile of booklets in Issue 4. For many readers, the format of the agreement will immediately bring back pleasant childhood memories of tree-house societies with secret handshakes, home-made membership cards, and treasure chests. For instance, upon opening the lid of the box and thus discovering the "Subscriber Agreement," readers are prompted to fill out their names in the blank space at the top of the page. In doing so, they not only claim ownership of their magazine copy — after all, the "Subscriber Agreement" is the first page in the magazine, and therefore not unlike the first page of, for instance, a secret diary — but also agree to a number of whimsical statements related to their tastes, lifestyles, and ideas so as to gain access to what reviewer Lee Siegel describes as "the exclusive egalitarian club known as McSweeney's" (50). In that sense, the agreement displays a type of contract-thinking that is reminiscent of the logic underpinning the aforementioned Bill of Rights, even though, in the case of the "Subscriber Agreement," the right to join the counterpublic united by *McSweeney's* also comes with a number of obligations.

By signing the agreement, the reader first of all supports Eggers's views on the value of the literary magazine as an aesthetic object by agreeing that "\$36 is not at all too much to pay for a subscription to *McSweeney's*. In fact, I agree I am being given a deal. A deal I scarcely deserve, considering my many flaws and sins." The supposedly undeserving reader is then told to handle his or her issues of *McSweeney's* with the appropriate care: I agree to give *McSweeney's* as a gift to those I love, and to keep it from those I do not ... I agree to treat my *McSweeney's* with great care and great affection and to not throw it when angry. I agree to protect it from the elements by keeping it wrapped in plastic, and behind glass. Above the mantle. I agree not to tarnish my *McSweeney's* with my filthy, filthy hands, which have been out all day touching God knows what, and should not be used to hold a journal that is clean of surface and soul" ("Subscriber"). Like all other objects of considerable value, the "Subscriber Agreement" suggests that issues of *McSweeney's* are exclusive items that should be taken great care of and deserve to be put on display.

In addition to appreciating aesthetically pleasing literary artifacts, however, readers of *McSweeney's* also subscribe to a number of statements that go far beyond the contractual nature of conventional subscription forms: "I agree that it is unusual but not necessarily wrong to think of whales while having intercourse ... that roads needn't be gray and buildings needn't be gray and black and brown, ... that oceans are best when they are warmer than the air above them, and are even better when there are whales in them, with shiny black backs and dead-looking eyes" (Subscriber). The "McSweeneyites" (Siegel 50) are cast as an unconventional group of people who not only are willing and able to imagine a world that transcends the blandness of everyday life, but also have a disturbing and embarrassing fetish about whales. What makes the reference to whales particularly fascinating in this context is the fact that it is presented as a potential source of shame

common to all McSweeneyites, so that it comes to function as a vehicle for community building. The underlying mechanism is thus similar to the one that Daniel Worden discerns in his case study of *McSweeney's* Issue 13, a special comics issue edited by Chris Ware: by "cast[ing] comics as a 'vulgar' medium and, like pornography, something that brings shame on both artist and reader" (891), the issue foregrounds shame as "a mode of readerly participation" (893) and a means to "cement ... comics artists and readers into a counterpublic that produces various resistances to social conventions" (913). Equally shameful are the supposedly "nerdy" priorities of the *McSweeney's* counterpublic, a group of readers who "agree not to buy expensive sunglasses" but rather "give *McSweeney's* [their] money" and who are made to state "that all trombonists are saints, and that riding stationary bikes is not good" ("Subscriber").

Clearly, the rationale behind *McSweeney's* community building strategy is essentially metaphorical: the individual reader is said to be *similar* and therefore *connected* to the other members of the virtual community created by the magazine. By producing links between individual readers on the basis of the alleged similarities between them, the editorial staff of *McSweeney's* boosts readers' identification with the virtual community of the magazine, which in turn, and like the myth of Timothy McSweeney, helps to build loyalty to the brand *McSweeney's*. Indeed, even for Eggers, who "has flourished in the mainstream even as he has continued his eccentric dissent" from its values and practices (Siegel 50), the rules of the literary marketplace apply: a predictable revenue stream through subscriptions is necessary to ensure the continued production of high-quality literary artifacts. This is even more obvious when we note that present-day buyers of Issue 4 are informed by a round sticker that the lifetime subscription offer that was included in the first edition of the issue "is no longer valid. To subscribe, please visit store.mcsweeneys.net." This paratextual change not only suggests that present-day buyers have somehow missed out on the "original" *McSweeney's* experience, but also reflects the current scale and level of professionalization of the *McSweeney's* enterprise, as subscriptions are now processed online.

That Eggers nevertheless remains uncomfortable with the business aspect of *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* is illustrated by the uneasy and at times apologetic arrogance that permeates Issue 4. For instance, in what appears to be yet another ironic attempt to pre-empt criticism, the editor's note in Issue 4 addresses potential subscribers as follows: "SUBSCRIPTIONS are yours for the having, without condition or license — but requiring certain agreements (see card [the "Subscriber Agreement"], elsewhere in box) — and are now \$36 for four issues. Yes, the price is ever-rising. First \$20, then \$28, then \$30, now \$36 ... it's a bit like the Post Office. Oh, the Post Office. Oh. The reason for the price increase is fairly self-evident, and we hope you understand. From you we expect tolerance and understanding, for we knew your parents and know your children, and will be watching your movements closely" ("Notes" ii). While the statement conveys the editorial team's self-consciousness about the "ever-rising" selling price of subscriptions, it also appears to conveniently shift the blame to the consumer price index by arguing that the magazine is "a bit like the Post Office. ... The reason for the price increase is fairly self-evident." Clearly, the latter statement is pure bluff — which dovetails with the rhetoric of the rest of the passage — for it is in fact far from self-evident why subscription costs have increased. For instance, as the materiality of *McSweeney's* becomes more elaborate as of Issue 4, subscriptions may have gone up in price not because of inflation but simply because intricately designed magazines are more expensive to produce and to ship. In any case, by linking *McSweeney's* to the consumer price index and everyday commodities such as stamps, the editorial team inserts the magazine into consumer culture and the logic of commodity production. Readers are then asked for their understanding, because, after all, no one can control the index. The result is a deeply ambivalent message of which the tone is at once promotional ("SUBSCRIPTIONS are yours for the having without condition or license"), mildly irritated with the readers' potential objections ("Yes, the price is ever-rising"), apologetic ("we hope you understand"), arrogant ("we expect tolerance and understanding"), and even mob-style threatening ("we knew your parents and know your children, and will be watching your movements closely"). These complex tonal shifts testify to Eggers's unease with the paradoxical nature of his publishing and authorial enterprise.

In conclusion, the paratextual make-up of Issue 4 of *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* produces a space in which Eggers's proposed paradigm shift for the publishing industry is at once

explained, put into practice, and evaluated. The box structure of Issue 4 and the various booklets it contains present the reader with a portable library of book(let)s-as-they-should-be according to Eggers and, by extension, the unconventional and deliberately absurdist aesthetics of his independent publishing house McSweeney's, which propagates a new relationship between authors, publishers, and readers. In the case of *McSweeney's* Issue 4, in particular, the nature of this relationship is explained by means of an example that betrays Eggers's background in graphic design: book jackets. As the editorial team — or, indeed, "Timothy McSweeney" — explains in the semi-serious "The Author's and Book Enjoyer's Bill of Rights, At Least Insofar as the Book Jacket Is Concerned," all authors published in Issue 4 were given the freedom to choose their own cover designs, so as to circumvent the conformity-inducing restrictions that are usually imposed by a company's sales department. However, as we have argued, new constraints imposed by the editorial team of *McSweeney's* at least partly counteract the intended effect of the proposed changes and inevitably conjure up associations with (the homogenizing effect of) mainstream publishing practices, in at least three ways. First, with authors' freedom to choose their own book jackets come new criteria in terms of graphic design and "subject matters encouraged for submitters of submissions" ("Notes" ii, iv). The editorial team of *McSweeney's* may well present these rules in a satirical tone, yet authors and artists generally abide by them to ensure that their submissions fit in with the magazine's overall aesthetics and are thus more likely to be accepted for publication. Second, and despite Eggers's repeated disavowal of economic interest and his identification with independent publishing practices and values, *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* still produces commodities — beautiful and original ones, but commodities nonetheless — as its community-building strategies serve to boost consumer loyalty, while its visual aesthetics have already turned Issue 4 into a collectible commodity. And third, the myth of Timothy McSweeney and the coherent editorial vision that it suggests function very much like the rules laid out by the (equally evasive) sales department in corporate publishing companies, even though the dynamic that propels them may be different. That the result of *McSweeney's* unconventional approach is a best-selling collector's item of which the aesthetic is recognizable and coherent — and thus inevitably homogenizing and brand-building — is the intriguing irony of *McSweeney's* Issue 4. Like Eggers's reactions to and pre-emption of criticism in the context of *A.H.W.O.S.G.*, the ambivalence displayed in *McSweeney's* Issue 4 illustrates the author's persistent unease with the dynamic that sustains his project. As an author and editor who finds himself at once inside and outside the market, Eggers is constantly concerned with this underlying paradox that permeates his work — a paradox that does not simply go away, even if it is self-consciously acknowledged.

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